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Empowering Art: Reconfiguring narratives of trauma and hope in the Australian national imaginary

Magowan, F. (2014). Empowering Art: Reconfiguring narratives of trauma and hope in the Australian national imaginary. *Open Arts Journal*, (3), 211-223. <https://doi.org/10.5456/issn.2050-3679/2014s36fm>

Published in:
Open Arts Journal

Document Version:
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Queen's University Belfast - Research Portal:
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EMPOWERING ART: RECONFIGURING NARRATIVES OF TRAUMA AND HOPE IN THE AUSTRALIAN NATIONAL IMAGINARY

Fiona Magowan

Abstract

Aboriginal art has been the source of much contention between art curators, gallery owners, art critics and Aboriginal artists themselves. Early aesthetic debates about whether so-called traditional works should be considered ethnographic or artistic have led, at times, to conflicts over the rights of Aboriginal people to have their works exhibited according to the criteria applied to other kinds of Western artworks. This article explores how the dilemmas of troubled ethno-histories are critically embodied and reconfigured in texture and colour. It considers the problems that silenced histories pose for those responsible for their display to the public. As Aboriginal images often conceal troubled intercultural encounters it asks how artworks can be used to provide a counter-polemic to national rhetoric as artists seek to reshape and improve intergenerational futures.

This text is published as a counterpart to the contribution to *Disturbing Pasts* from the artist Heather Kammara Shearer.

Keywords: Aboriginal Australians, contemporary art, conflict, resolution, intercultural, intergenerational, colonialism, racism, dispossession

DOI: dx.doi.org/10.5456/issn.2050-3679/2014s36fm

Biographical note

Fiona Magowan is Professor of Anthropology at Queen's University, Belfast. Her publications focus on Indigenous music, performance and Christianity; cultural tourism; religion and ritual; and sex and gender. She has conducted fieldwork in Arnhem Land, Northern Territory, Queensland and South Australia. Her books include *Melodies of Mourning: Music and Emotion in northern Australia* (Oxford, 2007); *The Anthropology of Sex* (Oxford, Berg 2010, co-authored with H. Donnan); and the co-edited volumes *Performing Gender, Place, and Emotion in Music: Global Perspectives* (Rochester 2013, with L. Wrazen); *Transgressive Sex* (Oxford, Berghahn 2009, with H. Donnan); *Landscapes of Performance* (Aboriginal Studies Press 2005, with K. Neuenfeldt); and *Telling Stories* (Allen and Unwin 2001, with B. Attwood). She is CI on an ESRC project (The Domestic Moral Economy in the Asia-Pacific, 2011-15) and was senior researcher on the HERA project Creativity in a World of Movement (2010-12). She has been a former Chair of the Anthropological Association of Ireland, member of the Royal Irish Academy's National Committee for Social Sciences and Chair of the Music and Gender Study Group of the International Council for Traditional Music.

An earlier version of this material was presented on the occasion of the project conference 'Disturbing Pasts: Memories, Controversies and Creativity' (20 -22 November 2012, Museum of Ethnology/Weltmuseum Wien, Vienna).

'Disturbing Pasts: Memories, Controversies and Creativity' is financially supported by the HERA Joint Research Programme 'Humanities as a Source of Creativity and Innovation', co-funded by AHRC, AKA, DASTI, ETF, FNR, FWF, HAZU, IRCHSS, MHEST, NWO, RANNIS, RCN, VR and the European Union's Seventh Framework Programme for research, technological development and demonstration under grant agreement no 235366/291827.



Co-funded by
the European Union

EMPOWERING ART: RECONFIGURING NARRATIVES OF TRAUMA AND HOPE IN THE AUSTRALIAN NATIONAL IMAGINARY¹

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Since the early 1970s, the rise of contemporary Aboriginal Australian art has provided Aboriginal artists with an autobiographical medium through which to depict their identities regionally and as representatives of Australia's First Nations. In this article, I explore how the work of one Arrernte Stolen Generations' artist,² Heather Shearer, is facilitating new dialogues of identity. By speaking out the hurts of history as an acclaimed artist and activist rather than in the terms of 'victim' or 'survivor', I consider how the potency of Shearer's artistic achievements and politics are brought together in her narratives of art. These stories are personalised polemics that contrast with past government policies and political discourses. When an artist's life story is juxtaposed with 'official' narratives, it raises a double-sided question, firstly, about what is written into and out of Indigenous images and histories of telling; and, secondly, how stories expressed in art can transform an individual's suffering and hurt into a sense of pride and dignity. In this analysis, imaging one's personal past will be shown to be a co-active process of confronting the misconceptions posed by history, as Shearer has been

¹ I am especially grateful to Heather Shearer for her professional collaboration, friendship and enthusiasm in sharing her stories and artwork. She has been generous in giving of her time and providing feedback as we have sought to bring these pieces to fruition. I would also like to thank Dr. Leon Wainwright for his hospitality and efforts in hosting the 'Disturbing Pasts: Memories, Controversies and Creativity' conference, held at the Museum of Ethnology, Vienna, 20-22 November 2012, at which an earlier version of this paper was presented. I thank HERA for financial support for the research and Dr. Maruška Svašek for her very effective organisation of the HERA project 'Creativity in World of Movement' (2010-12) during which my collaboration with Heather Shearer began.

² Arrernte groups are divided into Northern, Southern, Eastern and Central areas located around Alice Springs covering an area of around 150,000 square km. Heather Shearer's ancestry includes both Eastern and Western Arrernte connections.

intimately involved in fighting for the rights of Stolen Generations to reclaim family connections. First of all, I begin by briefly outlining the development of the Aboriginal art movement and locating Shearer's Arrernte relationships in the context of traumatic historical events that have informed her work as part of the Stolen Generations' Movement. I then consider how these aspects of her life have generated alternative imaginaries for her creative practice as national politics; one that is distinct from and yet in dialogue with the global art world.

Distinct histories have shaped the development of Aboriginal art for the global art market across the Australian continent. Yet, each region has also been subject to early European notions of 'primitive art' and the colonisers' shared visions of remote otherness. Based upon colonial views of art as part of the evolutionary relics of the past, this Western imaginary created misconceptions about how Aboriginal art should be understood when set against measures of cultural progress and degrees of civilisation, rendering paintings more suited to collectors' cabinets and the display cases of ethnographic museums (see Griffiths, 1996).³ In his comprehensive analysis of Australian art styles and trajectories, Morphy (1999, p.330) has shown how Aboriginal art and artefacts continued to be produced in regions such as southeast Australia even when missionaries and government authorities were not always supportive of performances of 'traditional' culture.⁴ Elsewhere, missionaries in northeast Arnhem Land were central to promoting a new art economy, as commissions in the early 1900s, from the then National Museum of Victoria sought to expand bark paintings and collections of other artefacts from 1911 to 1912 (Megaw and Megaw, 1994, p.62). Art and commerce had also been part of first contact since the arrival of the First Fleet to Southeast Australia in the 19th century, when trade encounters had been marked by ornately decorated weaponry from spear throwers to boomerangs and clubs (Morphy, 1999, p.330).

Paintings were thus only one component of a wider set of artefacts, including fibre baskets, headdresses, ritual armbands and necklaces, as well as decorated material culture from engraved weapons

³ Throughout the 19th and early 20th centuries, objects were collected with scant information and documentation which remains difficult for curators to confirm in terms of cultural specificities, as records have been lost or have deteriorated over time.

⁴ He notes how in 1887, the governor of Victoria had asked to see an Aboriginal corroboree but that the government authorities prohibited it, presenting him with a picture of Aboriginal dancers by William Barrak as a substitute (Morphy, 1999, p.329).

and boomerangs to coolamons that could be sold.⁵ As artworks circulated in global exchanges, some art critics and gallery owners considered that these objects' aesthetic was based more upon a universal taste than upon an understanding of the meaning or intention of the designs as they were produced in their local context. Such differences of opinion underpinned debates about whether works intended for sale could be truly representative of ritual forms. In turn, this led to artworks being variously classified according to degrees of authenticity or inauthenticity. In the 1930s in northeast Arnhem Land, bark paintings with public ritual designs were commissioned by the anthropologist Donald Thompson, together with Reverend Wilbur Chaseling who was also concerned to avoid innovation to preserve their 'authenticity' as they traded them to Australian museums (Williams, 1976, p.272 cited in Svašek 2007, p.107). Nevertheless, in spite of their efforts at realigning ritual forms with marketplace expectations, the fact that 'contemporary bark paintings from Arnhem Land... had always been made for sale' meant that they 'were treated with suspicion and hence were not authentic "primitive art"' (Morphy, 1999, p.374).

While European concepts of primitivism contrasted 'traditional' artworks of an unchanging past with the progressive ideals of a modern European avant-garde in the first part of the twentieth century, so some non-Indigenous artists such as Margaret Preston were actively drawing inspiration from Aboriginal art (Morphy, 1999, p.371; North, 1980).⁶ At this time, the classification of Aboriginal art was also being redefined externally in part by the techniques and materials used in its production. In Central Australia, where ritual sand designs, body paintings and objects were highly restricted and not for public sale, the skills of a non-Indigenous artist, Rex Batterbee, were to prompt a new Arrernte watercolour tradition during his painting trips to Hermannsburg in the 1930s. In 1936, following a request from Lutheran mission superintendent, Pastor Albrecht, Battarbee began to teach Albert Namatjira

to paint landscape in watercolour (see Mountford, 1949; Battarbee, 1951; Hardy et al., 1992). As his work became renowned in Australian exhibitions for their European style, so Namatjira enjoyed national acclaim for the next twenty years until his death in 1959 and his style has persisted in other media with landscape images on contemporary Hermannsburg pottery (Morphy, 1999, p.279; West, 1996). The skilled eye of his artistry has been handed down to his maternal niece, Heather Shearer. Although she does not follow the style of his famous watercolours, she has gained national recognition independently for her own vivid and vibrant works having been a former winner of the (NAIDOC, National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Day Observance Committee) Artist of the Year Award and winner of the NAIDOC National Poster Design Competition.

By the 1970s, Aboriginal paintings were subject to art critics' dichotomies of traditional/contemporary and rural/urban, which, in turn, served to fashion political agendas in the making of national identity claims. This trend had begun in the mid-20th century, when European tastes were again changing in favour of more traditional designs through Preston's influence. This preference was to meet with a new challenge through the emergence of the Papunya school of painting in 1971 whose 'Aboriginal artists transferred their ancestrally inherited designs and images into synthetic paints on portable surfaces' (Caruana, 1993, p.107). Inspired by teacher-artist Geoffrey Bardon, Papunya men began to recreate their body paintings, sand designs or rock art on a mural on the school wall with permission of the owner of the Honey Ant Dreaming, Old Tom Onion Tjapangati (Caruana, 1993, p.108). With Bardon's help, interest grew to a degree that eventually led to the establishment of the Papunya Tula Artists' Cooperative (Caruana, 1993). The movement is renowned for its innovation and experimentation in colour, styles and images which gradually reduced the prevalence of 'naturalistic' figures in favour of concentric circles and dots which carried a plurality of meanings without revealing secret knowledge (Caruana, 1993, p.108). The movement has since had significant impacts upon several groups connected to this dreaming, including Arrernte, Anmatyerre, Luritja, southern Warlpiri and especially Pintupi whose artists have been recognised in exhibitions, major collections and national art prizes. What is particularly remarkable about the movement, Morphy (1999) argues, is the fact that it came after the inception of the watercolour tradition reflected in Namatjira's Aboriginal visions of his country.

5 For example, art provided significant income for Aboriginal artists in communities in southeast Australia between 1916 and 1942 (Morphy, 1999, p.371).

6 Margaret Preston championed Australian modernism through her frequent travels to Europe, Africa, Oceania and the Middle East. She believed that Australian art could develop a unique style and she sought to incorporate influences from other cultures to that effect. Her work in NSW in the 1920s and especially after the 1930s illustrates the impact of Aboriginal Australian styles on her art together with her experiences visiting Aboriginal lands which further influenced her choice of colours. For details, see <http://nga.gov.au/Preston/essay.cfm>.

Artworld conflicts in defining the terms of innovation and tradition were also to form the basis of debates about what could be included or excluded from fine art and contemporary art genres. Today, such categories have become less contested and exhibitions within Australia and overseas have challenged the ethnocentrism of primitivism to liberate styles, genres and artistic intentions from concepts of authenticity. Instead, 'Aboriginality is not restricted to a narrow set of signs: it reflects complex political processes and relates to people's lives in their entirety' (Morphy, 1999, p.272). As we shall see, it is this diversity of genres which speaks to personal triumphs and traumas as well as to troubled state and national histories in the lives of Stolen Generations' artists.

The Stolen Generations' Movement

The blinkered views of Europeans about what constituted Australian Aboriginal art were also evident in government assimilation policies which had denied Aboriginal identity and rights and for whom the hurts of the past were not publicly acknowledged until the National Apology in 2008.⁷ Heather Shearer's life and her artistic expressions have been marked by growing up through this denial of politics but it has also given her the impetus to seek her own personal legitimacy by her tireless involvement in the contemporary development of the Stolen Generations' Movement.⁸ The Movement was spurred by the atrocities of state Acts across the continent that permitted child removal or which had the power to separate children from their families without legal challenge.⁹ Legislation began in 1909 through the Aborigines Protection Act in New South Wales and other states soon followed. In some

regions, mission dormitories received children who had been stolen from their families while, in other areas, children were adopted by non-Indigenous families reassigning blood ties, creating cultural surrogacy (Rowse, 2012). All the Acts were abolished by 1969. However, the revoked policy had come too late for Shearer as she had been adopted into a family in Adelaide and was unable to access any information on her blood relations. The impact was emotionally and relationally damaging for her, affecting a sense of 'disconnected continuity'. She explained her feelings of loss growing up without her Alice Springs' relatives:

I'm an observer in their stories, I should have been there and I wasn't. I really feel the loss of not growing up with them. I should be involved; a part of their stories not being told stories of them growing up. If I start talking about what I did when I was young, it's like, it's so surreal for them, my world that I grew up in, that's where there's a division.

By the 1960s, the nation had begun to imagine Aboriginal people as having a separate and legitimate status, but this idealism was far removed from the reality of the difficulties, which Shearer encountered during her search for her Aboriginal mother and other family members. It was not until she took up the job as secretary of the Aboriginal Child Care Agency (ACCA) in 1978 at the age of eighteen that she was given assistance to trace her relatives.¹⁰ Gaining employment in a range of Aboriginal organisations, together with positions on committees and networks, Shearer was to play a key role in the politics of Aboriginal recognition to right past wrongs over the next thirty years, with her art gaining prominence from the early 1990s.¹¹ She attended the first Aboriginal Child Survival Seminar in 1979 in Melbourne, which was to form the basis of the new national body SNAICC (Secretariat of National and Aboriginal Islander Child Care). The organisation was established in 1981 and Shearer later held the position of Secretary of the organisation from 1988-1991. The first Link-Up Aboriginal Corporation had also been formed in New South Wales in 1980 just as discussions about SNAICC were in progress. Link-up

7 Prime Minister Kevin Rudd made a National Apology to the Stolen Generations on 13 February 2008 in which he honoured Aboriginal Australians and explicitly acknowledged the wrongdoings of the past that had caused great suffering. His speech was sealed with a reciprocal gift from Stolen Generations' elder Auntie Lorraine Peeters who offered a glass coolamon as 'a symbol of the hope we place in the new relationship you wish to forge with our people'. For more details on the apology to Australia's indigenous peoples, see <http://www.dss.gov.au/our-responsibilities/indigenous-australians/programs-services/recognition-respect/apology-to-australias-indigenous-peoples> (3.7.2014).

8 In 1981, historian Peter Read coined the term 'The Stolen Generations', which was the title of his report for the Department of Aboriginal Affairs in NSW on the removal of children in the region from 1883-1969.

9 Legislation on the protection and restriction of Aboriginal people to designated reserves was first passed in Queensland 1897, Western Australia 1905, South Australia and under the Northern Territory Aborigines Ordinance 1911.

10 In 1937, the government had adopted assimilation as the national policy which posited that Aboriginal people would live as if they were non-Aboriginal. This would eventually lead to conformity with whiteness given the right training and education, not because Aboriginal people were viewed as becoming whites per se, but because 'their Aboriginality was seen "as a problem"' (HREOC, 1997, p.272, cited in Probyn, 2003, p.67).

11 From 1993-95 she was employed as partner in her own business as an artist and designer for Shear-Art Wholesalers.

provided support and networking services for Stolen Generations' children and their families. Through her work with these organisations, Shearer has been recognised for her outstanding contribution in the Northern Territory and South Australia to the Stolen Generations having been nominated for an acclaimed Deadly Award in 2012.¹² She explained how she is still driven by the fact that 'there are not enough people who understand the history of this, the true histories of the Stolen Generation, the movement and how it all came to be. Too many people are no longer with us that have been on this journey and we just need to get on with the job now' (Shearer quoted in Butler, 2013).

The politics of art in activism

Shearer's positions and awards have been hard won in a climate of political struggle over the recognition of Aboriginal rights. By the 1970s, there still seemed to be little public acceptance of the multiplicity of Indigenous cosmopolitics,¹³ complex polities or diverse environmental relationships. While government grants were given to remote art centres and their curators, the recognition of land rights was still in its infancy. Government funds were also allocated to university research on art but struggling Aboriginal artists such as Kevin Gilbert (notable for his role as an activist in the Aboriginal Tent Embassy movement) did not receive funding for his initiative to establish a National School of Aboriginal Arts in 1971; instead, he was left to make ends meet out of his 'service-station art gallery located on the Pacific Highway' (Neale, 2000, p.269, see also Kleinert and Koch, 2012).

In different parts of the continent, access to resources and support for diverse expressions of Aboriginal art was unequal. The label 'transitional' had been applied to works that were not viewed as wholly traditional or part of the mainstream with the effect that they were neither one thing nor the other but held a liminal position which created a sense of 'category panic' (Spunner, 2012, pp.93–4). Ensuing tensions from non-Indigenous rural-urban discourses about Aboriginality led to a political backlash in the Aboriginal art movements of the 1980s. In this period,

¹² The Deadly Awards originated with the Redfern Boomali Aboriginal Arts Cooperative in 1995 and have become the country's recognition of Aboriginal achievements in politics, cultural activities, sport and entertainment.

¹³ Following Cheah and Robbins (1998, p.3), I use the term cosmopolitics here to refer to the field in which Stolen Generations' members find themselves navigating disparate, dislocated contexts variously as kin or friends but who also seek to legitimate their rootedness as a 'reality of (re)-attachment, multiple attachment or attachment at a distance' to places of familial belonging.

Koori art, referring to Southeastern urban artists, emerged as 'a new political position of unity, strength and of reclamation, a self-assigned space' separate from that previously termed 'Aboriginal' by the art world (Neale, 2000, p.268, see also Kleinert and Koch, 2012, p.3). Narratives of 'us' or 'not them' became critical in defining resistance and, by differentiating Koori art from other art forms, these discourses also succeeded in integrating and networking artists with one another. A unifying ideology thus began to emerge throughout the '80s and '90s that sought to understand suffering as inherent in an Aboriginal history of the nation. Through repoliticising historical narratives, Stolen Generations' artists, like Heather Shearer, were learning new languages and capturing visions of the past from their families.

By the 1990s, discourses of tradition and modernity in art were being redefined and displaced by the politicisation of history itself as atrocities of invasion and Australian conquest had become essentialised in 'History Wars' which pitted 'official' Australian history against 'unofficial' discourses of Aboriginal struggles for rights and recognition. Birch (2006, p.22) considers that the historical record has been determined in part by giving prominence to certain histories while omitting others and that the report on the Stolen Generations in 1997 entitled *Bringing Them Home* has been fundamental to 'the struggle for control of how Australia's past and Australia's memory is reconstructed'. In this struggle, narratives of dispossession have become part of a national 'canon' (Bruner, 1991) that has been subject to the rewriting of the Australian past, told either as 'white blindfold history' or as 'black armband history', as Geoffrey Blainey labelled it in his 1993 Latham lecture which was then published in *Quadrant* (pp.10–5). Politicians waded in on the debates; taking the opposite view, then Prime Minister, Paul Keating's Redfern speech, made on 10 December, 1992, highlighted white Australia's role in Aboriginal dispossession.¹⁴ His successor, John Howard sided with writers who denied the histories of child removal and violence as portrayed in *Quadrant Magazine* and who posited that the Stolen Generation had been 'rescued' rather than 'stolen' (Manne, 2009). Work by revisionist historians such as Reynolds (1999, 2003), Markus (2001) and Attwood (2000), which revealed the violence of frontier conflicts in the 19th century were considered sensationalised

¹⁴ 'We committed the murders. We took the children from their mothers. We practised discrimination and exclusion. It was our ignorance and our prejudice, (Keating, 2000, pp.60–4).

by some Australians.¹⁵ Kevin Rudd was subsequently criticised for manoeuvring between both positions (Manne, 2009). McIntyre and Clark (2004, p.12) note that historians were 'ill prepared for such public controversy' in a discipline that is based on interpretive difference rather than the 'forms of unilateral assertion'. More troublingly, these politicised debates were largely dissociated from their visceral effects upon Aboriginal people who wished to express their own histories rather than have them represented through non-Indigenous lenses (see, for example, Birch, 2006).

Heather Shearer's tenacity in pursuing her own cultural history is testament to a righteous anger which she has turned outwards for the benefit of other Aboriginal people through her work on numerous professional bodies. She has assisted them to recover links with families and communities that have been broken and helped them return loved ones to their rightful homelands. These efforts have been captured on screen and she has worked as a consultant for a 1986 documentary about removal and in numerous roles as a member of the National Sorry Day Committee (1998-2001),¹⁶ the Central Australian Stolen Generations and Families' Aboriginal Corporation Alice Springs and the Northern Territory since 2002 and as the South Australia delegate for the National Stolen Generations Alliance since 2009. The accounts of those she works with were seldom heard in the 'official histories' and yet they are the critical narratives that lie at the success or failure of the making and remaking of the nation. The 'Great Australian Silence' that Stanner identified in his Australian Boyer Lectures in 1968 continues in the identity politics and conflicting discourses about contemporary Aboriginal social life depicted in the 2013 UK and 2014 Australian screenings of John Pilger's film *Utopia*.¹⁷ Despite the visual evidence of 'inhuman,

¹⁵ Events that were subject to this critique included the 1838 Myall Creek Massacre. This violent encounter resulted in the murder of 28 Aboriginal men, women and children. Seven whites were tried and hanged for the crime. For more details, see: http://www.myallcreekmassacre.com/Myall_Creek_Massacre/Aftermath.html.

Walker (2013, p.312) notes that the annual memorial of this event has enabled healing processes to begin.

¹⁶ National Sorry Day ceremonies and marches are held annually on 26 May. Beginning in 1998, the year after the Stolen Generations' *Bringing them Home Report* was debated in Parliament, these events bring Australians together to express their remorse at the histories of removal and traumas caused to Aboriginal people.

¹⁷ W.E.H. Stanner had accused Australian historians of ignoring the effects of invasion, which was a result of evading others' views about Aboriginal treatment with a view to them becoming insignificant (see Gunstone, 2004). Pilger's film examines abuses and mistreatment experienced by Aboriginal people at Utopia, 200 miles North of Alice Springs

disgraceful and embarrassing' conditions in Utopia (Waters, 2014), some commentators' critiques have emphasised how its residents have been cast as 'victims' while it omits any reference to the production of the extraordinary artwork that its artists produce (Finnane, 2014).

In other educational arenas, terms such as 'invasion' together with revisionist histories have become recognised discourses in Australian schooling, as Aboriginal History has been compulsory to year 10 since 2010. However, it is only since January 2012 that more emphasis has been given to teaching about Stolen Generations with reference to the National Sorry Day and the Anniversary of the Apology in this curriculum. In these new and rapidly shifting milieux, historical accounts are inevitably couched in particular epistemological and interpretive terms as courses seek to chronicle the intercultural dynamics of cause and effect. In historical summaries of the Stolen Generations, it is often the moment of the traumatic event that is highlighted in children having been taken away. Questions of how Aboriginal people experience processes of regaining their pride and sense of personhood in the nation are only just reaching the understanding of many younger Australians and there are many other stories that are still continuing to emerge about how the Stolen Generations have successfully managed to empower themselves and their families.

Such is the story of Heather Shearer. By telling stories about her family in art, Shearer reconnects with her Alice Springs' family. Retracing her past in paint is one outworking of many other trajectories of her coming to know herself as she forms and reforms the enduring and unbroken relationship to her *Tjukurrpa* (Dreaming Law). The physicality of reconnection is as important as the narrative of belonging. Upon return to Alice Springs, her aunt had taken her to Ntaria (Hermannsberg) where she met her uncle and worked out her genealogies, before going on with another aunt to Atitjere (Harts Range) to chart a map of the area and individuals within it. Artistic connectedness for Shearer is a relationship between colour, kin and country, embodying 'the essences of the ochres' through which she has remarked that she 'looks back to our elders to get our guidance and we never forget where we come from'. Her reclamation of the colour of the land in painting in those early days was a statement about the inner essence of Shearer's personal identity, as well as an externalisation of the

and the effects of endemic poverty, indigenous imprisonment and disadvantage that have marked the histories of white Australian policies on its indigenous inhabitants.

right to belong. She has commented:

I started to visualise what I hadn't learned growing up, so I painted to have something tangible to look at it and read it just to know which communities were which and from there I started doing family trees, 'cos I'd meet my brothers and sisters and they'd have children and I'd think which one was that? In my notes, that's how I structured to do the paintings.

This is a process that she has had to undertake herself. Over the years, painting has become a personalised practice of reconciling her land, family and kin to herself that was far removed from national debates about what constituted Aboriginal art. Her Arrernte painting skills were shown to her by one of her Aunties, as she explained:

There was one day she was doing this painting and she had this corner and I said 'see that corner there, that's not finished yet'. She gave me the stick and said, 'that's for you to paint... if you don't paint it, I'm gonna leave it blank'. So, I was like 'I'll give it a go.' The yarnning and the discussion that went around while we were working on this painting just embraced me so much more, it was brilliant.

Nevertheless, Shearer did not adopt her Aunty's painting style. Instead, she sought to differentiate her work as a means of showing the alternative pathways of her life story which reminded her of times spent in Adelaide at Aldinga beach with the colours of the ocean, sand, rocks and cliffs, as well as of other colours in the desert and the teachings of her mother and father. Together with the right to be connected to kin came the responsibility of holding the *Tjukurrpa* (Dreaming Law) appropriately.

Heather Shearer's artistic sophistication enables her to go beyond the personal as a sought-after artist who can also create national representations of Aboriginal history. She most commonly produces these kinds of works in response to commissions from institutions through which she is able to extend her own kin narratives. In having the opportunity to work at different levels, Shearer's artworks have taken on a force of activism in which emotion narratives about the paintings 'mark one's own presence' at the same time as they can evoke collective ideals by alluding to policies that have failed to be translated into appropriate action in the nation (Ahmed, 2004, pp.14–5). A new politics of communicating identities through the past has developed amongst the Stolen Generations in art, music and autobiographies. This personalised

communicative space has afforded the potential for Aboriginal people 'to counter institutionalised and attitudinal racism by constructing narratives that offer alternative perspectives to those of European myths of Aboriginal inferiority' (Dalziell, 1999, p.172).

Along with other Stolen Generations' artists, Shearer has sought to counter hegemonic discourses by critiquing definitions of Aboriginality through a radical visual politics and by exploring the inherent contradictions of pan-Aboriginal values that recast the fragmentation of 'traditional' communities as both culturally distinctive *and* responsive to pluralism. By politicising and positioning Aboriginality as a reactive rhetoric against and through subordinated autobiographies, artists like Shearer have sought to work in a combination of image-making and narrativising processes that Dalziell (1999, p.272) has termed 'the discovery of the voice' which does not necessarily deny pain experienced but repositions the voice in the context of 'the understanding other'. The process is necessarily delicate, however, for those who 'haven't grown up to learn the song', as Shearer puts it. Yet, as she explains, her willingness to engage with the pain of dislocation is not simply a means of overcoming it but of reshaping her own history and those of her kin, challenging official histories in the process. She repositions her life story not as a victim of colonial assimilation but as a creative artisan of a powerful political corrective with the potential to affect a new communicative dynamic for herself and for other artists through the force of their visual narratives.

Experiencing 'Narrativity'

One reason why the new poetics of Aboriginal art is so effective is because artists like Shearer are changing the conditions of intercultural politics and discourses of history. They stand at an interstitial point through reclaiming their rights to belong by challenging histories of denial, narrativising their place in the world. Yet, part of the problem of reconstructing the 'History Wars' from an Aboriginal voice is the question of how dislocation occurs between intention and reception, narrator and listener in the work of 'becoming-text' (or artist) 'which becomes the condition for discourse itself' (Ricoeur, 1996, p.152). Ricoeur points out that the reader needs to be aware of a 'conflict of interpretations' creating rivalry between 'literal' meanings or 'social motivations' of texts alongside the fullness of their multivalent potential (1996, p.152). Following Seyla Benhabib, Mara Rainwater (1996, p.105) argues that interpretation is itself a process of dialogue. Thus, when acts of narrating the past are denied, such as in the 'History Wars', so interpretation

may lose its potency as a source of productive dialogue to move beyond entrenched rhetorics and change the politics of meaning. What is particularly poignant in this juncture is the image in relation to the word. The image enables the viewer to move beyond the politicisation of semantics to engage with the artists' experience of being there as a new form of social imaginary. For Shearer, who uniquely holds the 'poetic licence to interpret' her own style and meanings as they relate to her Atitjere family, referencing her belonging is a combination of creating (in terms of attachments to the *tjukurrpa*) and recreating the image as a modification of its original reference.

An artwork thus speaks to much more than the form or shape it evokes. In explaining the context of one of the series of her paintings of the Ghostgum, she commented,

When I think about them, I'm really complex in what I'm interpreting there. I just say to other people it's gumtree and shoots but when I explain it it's so much more. Places where I've been and I've seen the beautiful gumtree. When I'm homesick in Port Augusta, I just close my eyes and I'm home and I can remember every place I've been there ... I might do a series of ten Ghostgums and every one will look different as I might be highlighting a different aspect. In this one here, I'm highlighting the waterways. The painting is the externalisation of the place as an interpretation of expression of it. It's an expression of what comes to me which is the strength of it.

Rainwater (1996, p.107) concludes that what she calls 'narrativity' is a process of self-making in communication and interconnectedness with others in recognition of their 'self-definitions' and 'acts of narration'. Selfhood thus acquires legitimacy through acts of narration when listeners are receptive to the speaker's purposes.

In Shearer's account we also see that narrativity in turn, entails an intertwining of what Josephides (2010, p.164) calls 'speaking-with' aligned to 'feeling-with'.¹⁸ The sensorial dimension of self-other empathising can prompt both speaker and listener to engage a 'moral imagination' in which 'dialogue and conversation are cooperative models for communication that can certainly be as effective as purely argumentative

strategies in fostering mutual understanding' (Benhabib cited in Rainwater, 1996, p.106). As Josephides (2010, p.166) notes, '[s]peaking ... becomes an act that constructs both the self and the other and elicits the self from the other'. In this case, Shearer shows through her paintings, how narrativity invites the reader/listener into dialogue and conversation with her as she relates the histories behind her artwork, making it possible for her to 're-story' fragmentations of other 'official histories' through her own practices of self-making and alterity (Curtis, 2005, p.15). In this way, she is able to 'thread the thread of memory back' (p.15) from a range of her life experiences, inviting listeners to empathise with the conditions of her storytelling.

The process of threading narrativity back as action and 'moral imagination' is evident in many Aboriginal lifestories. For example, Deborah Rose's acclaimed work, *Hidden Histories* (1991), begins with a quote from Riley Young whose elders told him how he was to react to Europeans. They advised him 'if he wants to fight, give it away. Because olden times you know, you can get shot like a dog. They shoot you like a dog, and just let you burn on the fire'. These stories are not merely recountings of past violence; rather they act as 'affective mentalities' (Berlant, 2012), which narrator and hearer hold towards to the world. Their re-storying brings forth emotional refractions of the past that coalesce to create vivid recollections. While in some circumstances, memories of suffering may contribute to what Lauren Berlant (2011) refers to as 'dissociative life', 'a condition beyond which there is no immediate sense of hope', they may simultaneously, 'open an understanding of the present that is intended to lead to an altered future' (Rose, 1991, p.xxii).

Standing strong on a world stage

New communicative spaces between art and autobiographical narrative can provide a means of engaging with and transforming emotional anguish arising from experiences of oppression. Shearer shows how art can facilitate intercultural conversations about pride, locating her personal accounts of family and emotional trauma within a broader history of what Ahmed (2004) has termed 'affective economies' in which emotions circulate between individual and collective bodies and signs, taking note of the differential bodily experience and boundaries between alternative world views.¹⁹ Ahmed argues that the attribution of emotion to a nation recreates it as a

¹⁸ In discussing Grønseth's experiences of working with Tamil refugees, in the same volume on *Mutuality and Empathy*, Josephides notes how Grønseth viscerally experienced the rejection of her Tamil friends that in turn created an 'empathic understanding' (Josephides, 2010, p.168).

¹⁹ How one reads or interprets the other, inevitably influences how emotions are identified thus 'differentiating between the subject and object of feeling' (Ahmed, 2004, p.13).

shared object of feeling. The emotions Shearer conveys in explaining her art are specific to the remaking of her life story as a Stolen Generations' woman and a National Stolen Generations' Committee representative, extending from her Arrernte identity and permission given by her elders to paint. This process was brought home poignantly to me on one occasion when we were discussing the depth of feeling that she embodied in the symbol of handprints on her artworks. She explained that she always leaves the imprint of her *own* hand. This technique retains the space between the heel of the hand and the fingers but sometimes she paints over the image filling it in and at others, she leaves the gap. Her physical handprints then are an important aspect of her artistic selfhood – her signature. In some cases, she would take photos of the handprints to use as web designs to ensure that 'they're still the images of my paintings'. The common motif is also a lasting extension of herself.

Shearer's attention to detail in thinking about producing her authenticity of selfhood in the traces of touch within the painting is an expression of pride as much as rights of sensorial ownership. She previously extended the technique to include sweat, which she rubbed on the canvas and then painted over. Thus, rather than being a 'distanciated text' by which I came to know the meaning of the image, the sensoriality of her practice created a new dialogical context, as it reconfigured my understanding of herself within the land as a visceral force animating the painting.²⁰ As Shearer's stories and analysis of her artistic process suggest, 'narrativity' has the potential to move the listener/viewer beyond mere representations and interpretations of the image, inviting us to engage with her ruptures of selfhood affected by dislocation from her family. In making art, she affirms her identity with pride, drawing upon an embodied aesthetic that affirms visual, verbal and sensorial recognition of her identity and that of her relatives.

For those viewing the work of overseas artists, the outcomes of international visits may be unpredictable or difficult to assess. Durrant and Lord (2000, p.15) note that in analysing artworks there is the opportunity to consider 'cultures in transition' across 'different human environments and differently empowered subjects-in-process'. In one sense, travel has become a medium for enlarging the creative imagination to new ways of perceiving, feeling and engaging. Being

out-of-place may also encourage artists to become, as Markiewicz (2000, p.37) has observed, 'unaccommodated' in a process of 'losing oneself'. As artists move beyond the familiar home spaces of politics, nationalism and activism they encounter new modes of creative practice. This openness of artists to other cultural aesthetics invariably impinges upon their sensorial attachments to 'home'. However, Markiewicz (2000, p.38) argues that the effectiveness of art is not so much about generating a temporary sense of 'at-homeness', a refuge for 'housing oneself' when out of place, but creative improvisation is a process of embracing the sense of being 'unaccommodated'.

In the case of Stolen Generations' artists, such as Heather Shearer, this process is reversed. By having been deprived of the comfort of knowing 'home' and the sensoriality of place, feelings of being out-of-place or 'unaccommodated' have become normative. In her national and international movements, Shearer has built upon personal and professional networks and accrued a global profile through which she is able to present a new intercultural aesthetic. It is one that challenges the reified ideal of Aboriginal people as 'a seminal Other of the European imagination' (McLean 2011, p.69). Instead, her story and art is a microcosm of particular aspects of Australian history and the cosmopolitics of identity as it relates to her land and her family. Reviewing the literature on Aboriginal artists' presence on the world stage, Elizabeth Burns Coleman notes that there has been a longstanding practice of artists seeking to dialogue with 'sympathetic "whitefellas"' (McLean, 2010, p.19, cited in Burns Coleman, 2009, p.16) who have intentionally sought to attend exhibitions and talks bringing their own voices and perspectives to art world debates. Indeed, the opportunity to create new artworks overseas has given Shearer the chance to reflect upon how she presents and negotiates her identity which has further informed her aesthetic style in a feedback loop. In this process, the effects of dislocation together with (re)attachments to homeland and exposure to feelings of being-at-home overseas, mean that diverse senses of 'at-homeness' and being 'unaccommodated' articulate with one another and open up new 'spaces of affect' (van Alpen, 1997, cited in Markiewicz, 2000, p.44).

Repositioning the politics and poetics of difference

In her accounts of participating in and running international art workshops and exhibitions, Shearer explained how the opportunity to take collaborative work overseas has provided other ways of thinking about collective identities on a global scale. As part of

20 For a critique of the distinctions between how texts are distanciated due to the inaccessibility of the reader to the writer's utterances in the present versus the immediacy of the interpretive moment of 'dialogic utterance', see Wolterstorff (1995, pp.142–4).

an Ulster Arts invitation to Belfast in 1996, she gave a week of art workshops in Corrymeela, Ballycastle with women and mothers. The creative space enabled those involved to affirm senses of self in country while recognising cultural difference:

[I was] so privileged to be up there with the ladies and with the painting. It was not about going through the torture of what those issues were, but it's about, here, celebrate your life, the colours of your country, look at you, you know. And it was just fantastic.

Rather than focusing on traumas of the past, the opportunity to celebrate creativity together intensified a shared affect, bringing these women into a 'relational aesthetic' of hope (Bourriaud, 2002).

Connecting diverse artistic practices and ideologies was also part of a second Ulster Arts funded project which culminated in a community-led mural when Shearer assisted Tasmanian artist Max Mansell and local youth to design the gable of a building in New Lodge.²¹ Shearer recalls:

The painting was a snake. When St. Patrick threw the snakes out, we thought Snake Dreaming because when we came up with the name for it ... the Rainbow Dreaming was the connection through the rain and the rainbows of my country.

As international opportunities have increased for Aboriginal artists to showcase their works, so too have the occasions to share stories, expanding the horizons of engaging with others. Rather than just presenting artworks to display or narrate to audiences, Shearer explained how she has reoriented her views about the power of art through intercultural exchange. In 1998, two years after the Belfast trip, an exhibition, *Soaring Visions*, linked Shearer with Canadian First Nations' artists to share artistic ideas and perspectives.²² The research activities surrounding the work on this visit challenged her views about what kinds of impacts her work might have in global settings:

There was a lot of research around it looking at our responsibility as artists in the education process and how our art is part of that. It was awesome because it gave me something to think

about. It was coming on me that I had no idea about how it would be seen in a world context.

The realisation that narratives might be variously empowering and affirming or evoke unanticipated reactions, gives artists new potentialities for reflecting upon how their images may impact upon others' identities. As artists from other nations make sense of Stolen Generations' artworks, they, in turn, recover the agency of the artists they are discussing.²³ Shearer's recognition that there is a burden of uncertainty surrounding how her artistic interpretations are remade in other cultural contexts brings with it the responsibility of educating other nations about her own 'unofficial histories' that are gaining official recognition overseas.

The legacy of Stolen Generations' traumas has been addressed by many Aboriginal artists (and musicians), a number of whom are active in national Aboriginal politics. Ways of depicting Aboriginal selfhood in art, music and dance have become recognised modalities of cultural affirmation. Beyond localised politics of performance, Stolen Generations' artists like Shearer continue to impact international arenas, partly in their efforts to counteract non-Indigenous histories of disempowerment. As Shearer's work shows, the legacy of Aboriginal testimonies is not only about an individual's 'lived experience' but it is also about 'shifting interactions between agency, migration and the aesthetic entanglements that join these [intercultural] dimensions, while simultaneously guarding against romanticised conflations' (Durrant and Lord, 2000, p.13).

In trying to avoid romanticising representations of identity, I have sought to critique the problems inherent in narrativity, examining the complexities of making images that have shaped Shearer's artistic identity, together with some broader intersubjective challenges that working with an international arena of storytelling and artistry brings. As artists share their backgrounds and listen to one another's histories, so they increase visceral credence of each other's life histories through the effects of tone, dynamics, timbral quality and vocal intensity. It is in the power of presencing their life stories in colour and pattern that Aboriginal artists have the capacity to move audiences. Through art, the complexities of Australian Aboriginal life worlds have gained recognition internationally and Stolen Generations' artists have shown how creativity in pictorial forms can vocalise strong feelings about past sufferings, which they and their families have endured

21 New Lodge is a largely working-class Catholic area in north Belfast that has experienced violence between republican and loyalist paramilitaries. There is an extensive tradition of painting murals on walls and the sides of buildings representing the history of Northern Ireland's conflict.

22 The trip was supported by the University of Adelaide, Underdale Campus and the University of British Columbia.

23 See also Durrant and Lord (2000, p.18) on recovering migrant histories through art.

as a result of the effects of Australian government policies. For those like Shearer, art has become a key medium and co-active voice in effecting transference from a sense of dislocation to the affirmation of acceptance, rights of belonging to Country and pride in being an Aboriginal woman. As this process has gathered momentum among artists, so it has influenced ways of reconceiving national discourses, inviting non-Indigenous viewers to respond to the politics of difference, as well as to reconsider how Aboriginal re-enfranchisement has opened out the possibilities for remaking Aboriginal histories on their own terms, anew.

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